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## **WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN A STATE'S NATIONAL IDENTITY AND ITS FOREIGN POLICY?**

### **Introduction**

In answering the principal question concerning the relationship between national identity and foreign policy, I addressed a more detailed sequence of questions:

Is there a relationship between the national identity of the state and its behaviour towards other states? How does national identity influence the process of foreign policy formulation? Is foreign policy a factor in the development of a state's national identity and does national identity change as a consequence of a state's international status?

After summarising the shift in international relations theories towards the constructivist thesis on the role of collective identity and the national identity dynamic, the essay analyses the effect of national identity on foreign policy contrasting the international behaviour of ethnic states in Central Europe with civic states, with particular reference to the United States. This is followed by an examination of the way changes in the international context can prompt a shift in national identity. Finally, the essay concludes with a brief assessment of new practices in modern foreign policy which are creating or reinforcing national identity through nation branding.

### **Reassessment of International Relations Theories**

International relations experts who espouse realist or liberal internationalist theories of international relations would reply that there is no relationship between national

identity and foreign policy; that a state's national interest is not determined by its national identity but by geopolitics. On the one hand, realists such as Morgenthau believe that all states are motivated by the same national interest, namely the survival of the state in a threatening and hostile international environment. The state's primary objective is thus a balance of power achieved through alliances and conflict that will ensure security for that state. States therefore, in realist theory, behave rationally, reacting to geopolitical shifts. On the other hand, liberal internationalists believe that the primary national interest of states is to operate in a cooperative global environment which can be secured through the establishment and development of global norms and institutions governing international relations. The state's primary objective is thus to ensure the spread of democratic peace since successful democracies will not be tempted to attack one another (Walt, 1998).

Yet the end of the Cold War and the rise in ethnic conflict around the globe could not be adequately explained by either realist or liberal internationalist theories. The creation of new states from the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, and subsequent conflicts in the region, did not arise from shifts in the distribution of geopolitical capabilities, but were the consequence of changes in societal collective identities (Hall, 1999). Fukuyama's (1992) argument that the end of the Cold War had enabled liberalism to assume its position as the determining factor in global politics was contradicted by Huntington's (1998) claim that alien cultures and civilizations provoke a counter resurgence of attachment to indigenous cultures or religions and that confrontation is more likely than cooperation.

Constructivists such as Bloom, Hall and Prizel maintain that the collective ideas and beliefs of a society shape its perceptions towards other societies which in turn conditions its determination of national interest. *“This emotional, albeit irrational, sense of nation and national identity plays a vital role in forming a society’s perception of its environment [...] because national identity helps to define the parameters of what a polity considers its national interests at home and abroad”* (Prizel, 2003, p.14).

Bloom (1990) recognises the role of human psychology and the behaviour of masses in his definition of the national identity dynamic: where individuals identify with their fellow citizens and with the nation (that is, where successful national building has occurred) through a shared identity. Provided that the national interest is framed in terms of threats and opportunities to that shared national identity, the mass public can be mobilised, either by the state or by non-state actors, as a resource for the defence or enhancement of the national identity. Public support is unlikely to be forthcoming without such a connection to national identity.

Campbell (1998) makes a similar argument to the effect that by externalising threats, foreign policy serves a political function: unifying the domestic population and reinforcing a social identity which can be mobilised against such threats.

As Wallace puts it, *“states cannot survive without a sense of identity, an image of what marks their government and their citizens from their neighbours, of what special contribution they have to make to their civilization and international order. Foreign policy is partly a reflection of that search for identity.”* (Wallace, 1991, p.780)

### **How national identity influences foreign policy**

As Prizel (2003) asserts, the security of a state's own national identity will have an impact on the way that state perceives others. Where a state is confident in its national identity, its international behaviour is likely to be expansionist, assertive, consistent and generally predictable. Such states are likely to be those which followed a civic path to nation-building through the development of democratic political institutions, egalitarian citizenship laws, nation-wide education and linguistic assimilation. National identity is based on political culture, ideals and beliefs, rather than ethnicity.

States on the other hand which are culturally defensive and exhibit signs of victimhood or resentment towards others for historical reasons will be more focused on enhancing national prestige and status or righting perceived injustices which may take the form of aggressive behaviour towards others. Such states are likely to have emerged from imperial or colonial rule and have focused their nation-building efforts on resurrecting collective myths and memories about the origins and culture of the population at the expense of political institutions.

The effect of weak political institutions and nationalism is evident in Central and Eastern Europe where national identity is based on ethnicity rather than civic structures. Nationalistic policies in Germany and Russia are generally credited with the outbreak of both World Wars. *'The threat of war in our time lies [...] in the internal politics of those countries in which a weak government is confronted by a*

*strong nationalist movement*'. (Kurt Rietzler, political secretary of the German Chancellor, cited by Kissinger, 1994, p 184). Virulent nationalism in the former Yugoslavia was responsible for a decade of ethnic conflict in which Europe and North America were implicated in several guises: from peacekeeping, mediation to military offensive. The "beauty contest" to be in the first wave to join NATO became the most pressing foreign policy objective for Central European leaders because of the status that membership of these organisations conferred. Nationalistic sentiment in the region persists. Romanian sensitivity about the loss of Bessarabia to the Soviet Union in 1940 and their persistent vision of a united Romanian nation continues to needle both Moldova and Russia who question policies such as the decision to grant Romanian citizenship to potentially 1 million Moldovans. Greece's obsessive fear of Macedonian territorial claims has blocked international resolution of the name issue since FYROM achieved independence in 1992. Competition between domestic elites to be the foremost defenders of the national identity is leading to a rise in nationalistic and aggressive discourse towards other states which is a handicap to constructive and mutually beneficial relations.

States with a civic identity frequently take a messianic posture towards other states (Prizel, 1990). The UK and US have a long history of exporting their values and political systems: the 'white man's burden' of imperial Britain; the Four Freedoms of US President FD Roosevelt or, in the case of France, the French language. One of France's primary international objectives has been the promotion abroad of French culture and language. Indeed, France established the Alliance Francaise in 1883 specifically for this purpose and set up the Francophonie organisation in 1970 primarily in order to maintain the status of French as an international language,

although its mission has been expanded to include the promotion of peace, democracy and human rights, and it is doubtless a valuable tool for the promotion of French economic interests and political influence in the French-speaking world.

### **American Nationalism**

The US offers the clearest example of the inextricable relationship in a civic state between national identity and foreign policy. National identity in the US since the War of Independence has been predicated on its political system. What is known as The American Creed, the set of beliefs and principles put together by the founding fathers in the constitution, is the basis of American civic nationalism and the glue which binds the nation together, regardless of the ethnic, religious and cultural diversity of its population, and reinforces the American sense of moral superiority with respect to other states (Lieven, 2004).

Successive American leaders have credited the success of the American Creed with making the US a world leader politically, economically and militarily and have committed the US to spreading the principles of the American Creed to other states. *“The central themes of American foreign policy are more or less constant. [...] They derive from the kind of people that we are...”* (Dean Rusk, 1967, cited by Campbell, 1998, chapter 1). The US belief in its unique destiny to change the world and to make others in their image accounts for its missionary zeal for exporting democracy and the rule of law, either through soft power or hard power, to the rest of the world. To quote Woodrow Wilson, *“America had the infinite privilege of fulfilling its destiny and saving the world”* (cited by Lieven, 2004, p.33).

### **Foreign policy and shifting identity**

If national identity is shaped by perceptions of “the other”, it follows that changes in the external environment will impact on the national identity of states affected by the consequences. This is particularly true in cases of an increase in external threats, or in the aftermath of major events of violent conflict or war. Victory will arouse feelings of national pride; defeat will provoke a backlash against those responsible for national humiliation.

The defeat of the Axis Powers in WWII led to a profound shift of national identity in Germany. Not only was Germany humiliated but its territory was divided.

Nationalistic discourse disappeared for decades. Whether this would have remained the case if the US had not pumped millions into the German economy and allowed them to rebuild at least their economic prestige is impossible to say. It is notable however that following reunification, former East Germans have displayed signs of resentment and inferiority complex towards the west and xenophobic tendencies towards foreign migrant workers (Stent, 1990). West Germany did rebuild and in the process created a new identity for itself as a superefficient industrial and economic giant.

Stent also describes the changing international role of Germany since reunification, both within the EU and globally, noting that Germany has become more comfortable with its position as a leading power in international relations and has adopted a more assertive foreign policy stance. While Parliament retains a strong role in approving



military deployment abroad, from fear of resurgent militarism, Germany participates in NATO out-of-area operations which would have been inconceivable 20 years ago. Furthermore, Germany has been a strong advocate of deeper European integration. But there are signs of German disillusion with the EU following the Greek euro crisis and the expansion of the Schengen zone. Growing multiculturalism is of concern as evidenced by Chancellor Merkel's statement on 17 October 2010 (BBC News, 2010) and influences the German position on Turkish entry to the EU. Having rediscovered their strength and voice, they may be cautious about ceding their sovereignty to the EU and may be tempted to flex their muscles, figuratively speaking, more vigorously.

External threat will generally have a cohesive effect on a nation where the population will unite against the aggressor. The 9/11 attacks on the US did bring the American nation together and the war on terror was launched with popular and bipartisan support. However, the strident rhetoric used by the Bush Administration has spawned an aggressive and intolerant form of American nationalism which is at odds with the American creed. President Bush challenged the world to back him or oppose him, with the unspoken threat that those who failed to offer their support for the war on terror were enemies of the US state. Domestic critics of the war on Iraq were described as un-American. While temporarily uniting the American people, the Bush policies on terrorism were perceived by both allies and rivals as undermining the American principles and values which were the basis of its status as "*a benign and global hegemon*" (Lieven, 2004, p.222). Notwithstanding the Obama effect, the US has not recovered the political ground it lost through the invasion of Iraq and the effectiveness of American foreign policy is heavily diluted, particularly in the Middle East. While the US remains the target of hostility and resentment, the stronger the

likelihood that what Lieven calls “beleaguered hysteria” will extend, and vice versa. Thanks to the global media coverage, the threat to burn the Koran by an insignificant preacher in Florida could have sparked a dangerous escalation of violence.

Globalisation and the development of supranational institutions are contributing to shifts in national identities in two ways: either people become less nationalistic as they experience the advantages of regional and global cooperation; or they perceive such developments as a threat to national sovereignty and their own identity and thus resist such pressures. *“The growing internationalization of modern politics has resulted in the progressive alienation of the population from many political institutions leading to an even greater reliance on ‘national’ identity”* (Prizel, 2004, p.405).

The debate in Britain over the European Union project demonstrates this dichotomy. Competing interpretations of the national interest within informed circles of decision makers are accompanied by media coverage questioning the benefits of a more integrated Europe and offering multiple examples of attacks on British sovereignty from encroaching European federalism.

Wallace (1991) argues that the schism in British politics over Britain’s place in the European Union is the consequence of a divide between those who cling to pride in the old image of Britain as a strong and independent Anglo-Saxon military and economic power with a commitment to freedom and democracy, and those who hold that Britain as a modern multicultural society should cease its nostalgic attachment to the past and embrace a European identity. He draws attention to the decline in

capabilities on which Britain's independent status was founded, which has imposed a readjustment of national identity. But the rise of the BNP and the English Defence league, the recent acrimonious debates about immigration and multi-culturalism in Britain, and the resurgence in popularity of the Armed Forces much of the British population is reluctant to give up their traditional identity and that British foreign policy towards European integration accordingly will remain ambivalent.

### **Image and Reputation: Nation Branding**

The assertion that ideas and image are influential in foreign policy is further supported by the trend for nation branding. Most modern governments today would agree that international relations are no longer merely state-to-state processes and that the attitudes of the general public, the media, and the non-state sector, especially business and religious groupings are relevant to the definition of the national interest. Promoting or creating a specific image of a state through nation branding has become the latest tool in the foreign policy arsenal of most states, designed to enhance national advantages in an increasingly competitive global environment although Wally Olins (2007) states that nation-branding is not a new development, having begun with the nation-building process in France following the Revolution. Image and reputation are replacing substance in international relations, particularly in the economic field, as a means to increase tourism, attract foreign investment, sell exports, or draw foreign students to their educational establishments, or host international events, for example high profile sporting events like the Olympics or high-level international conferences.

Corporate brands and state identities are becoming intertwined. Olins (2007) refers to a series of interviews on German nation branding in the early 1990s where the overwhelming image of Germany was its automotive industry. Either the attributes of the product are being transferred to the state or the values of the state are a factor distinguishing the product, such as German efficiency from German automobiles, or high fashion brands like Hermes in France with French style and chic (van Ham, 2001). Van Ham argues that the supplanting of nationalism by state branding is a positive development:

*“The brand state’s use of its history, geography, and ethnic motifs to construct its own distinct image is a benign campaign that lacks the deep rooted and often antagonistic sense of national identity and uniqueness that can accompany nationalism. By marginalizing nationalist chauvinism, the brand state is contributing greatly to the further pacification of Europe.”*  
(2001, p.3).

## **Conclusion**

The essay attempts to demonstrate the validity of constructivist international relations theories that there is a strong interconnection between the national identity and the foreign policy of a state in two respects. First, national identity is a factor in determining the national interest of the state and the objectives of foreign policy, which may be focused on exporting ideas and principles, as in the case of strong civic states, or may be directed rather to building up national prestige and status in the case of states with weak institutions but strong cultural defensiveness. Secondly, foreign affairs has an impact on national identity: nationalistic behaviour may be reinforced or diluted or adjusted according to the circumstances. Finally, nation branding has become a modern tool of foreign policy of promoting national identity and image to

achieve a national interest objective but without an aggressively or provocative nationalist tone.

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